INTERMEDIATE

BLUES GURU ROBBEN FORD

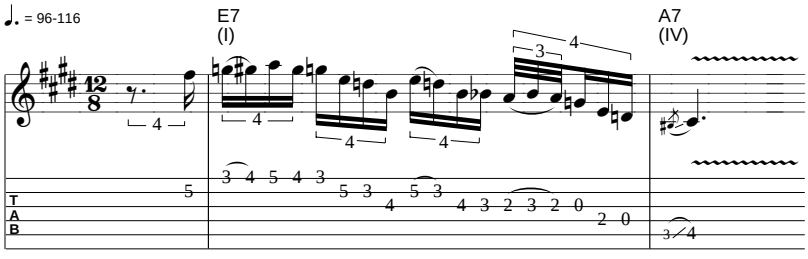
That Cool Four-Against-Three Sound

The blues often has a triplet—some would say shuffle—feel that we typically write out as 12/8 or 6/8 meter, which indicates three pulses per downbeat. But many musicians, from bebop horn players to blues guitarists, like to occasionally put four pulses in the space of those three—that is, play straight sixteenth-notes over the underlying triple feel. Here's a nice lick that just popped into my head that demonstrates exactly what I'm talking about [Ex. 1]. Try going into it after playing in a typical shuffle feel for a while. If anything, it's the "shifting gears" from the triplet rhythm into the straight 4/4 feel that sounds so refreshing—not to mention the fact that because this lick contains both G♭ and G♯ [beat one, bar 1] it's nicely ambiguous. It could be considered to be in either E minor or E major. The phrase comes alive when it's played at the tempo indicated—in other words, fairly fast. Like many licks, it just doesn't sound right if it's played too slow or too fast.

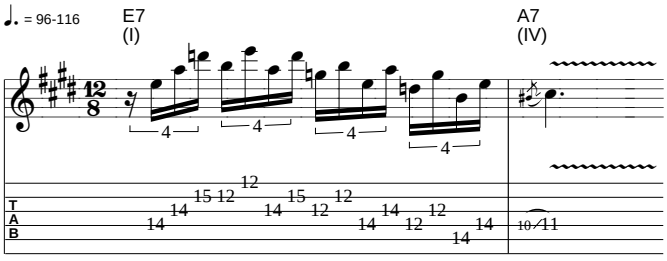
While playing in this four-against-three feel, I sometimes play patterns such as Ex. 2, which brings out some of the perfect-fourth intervals that occur naturally in the E pentatonic scale, such as the E-A, A-D, B-E, and D-G intervals shown. As demonstrated in Ex 3, I'll even get a whole-tone sound by playing fourths that descend down the pentatonic scale until, starting with C♭ [second pulse in beat three, bar 1], the pattern naturally starts taking me down the E whole-tone scale for an interesting flavor.

There's nothing wrong with playing patterns, and they're great for adding variety to your playing, but truthfully, I rarely use them anymore. They're simply not that vocal, and, therefore, don't always serve the blues. I might save licks like the last two examples for a different context. Patterns may be most useful for learning the fretboard and building up dexterity. I used to play more pattern-based stuff, but my whole approach—my whole journey as a blues player—is to keep things musical, raw, simple, and emotional. Those things are the basic ingredients of the blues. —As told to Jude Gold.

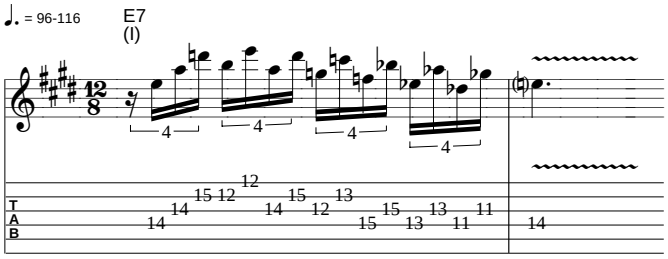
EX. 1



EX. 2



EX. 3



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